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ABSTRACT

We have succeeded in teaching students to think for themselves, to debate controversial issues, to challenge traditions and to question authority. Now, however, many schools are threatened by the very things they have tried to instill in their students. Students are demanding a more relevant education, fairer discipline practices, and a greater opportunity to participate in the decision making processes of their schools. A great deal of student unrest can be attributed to a lack of communication. Therefore, the following suggestions are offered to improve the educational climate and better human relations within our schools: (1) principals and teachers need to develop a greater understanding of today's student and learn new skills to deal with him and his problems; (2) Counseling services should be expanded and improved; (3) student councils should be given more authority; and (4) the curriculum should be modified so that greater emphasis is placed on current problems and issues. (RSM)

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Secondary School Student Activism: An Up-Tight Communication Problem

by

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Some of our problems are obviously a product of our successes. We have succeeded in teaching many students to think for themselves, to study and debate controversial issues, to formulate their own opinions, and to speak and write forcefully. We have taught that students should be contributing members of our society, should be concerned about their community, and should be active participants rather than only observers. Now, when students do speak out, do think for themselves, do challenge tradition, do question authority--as we taught them to--we often don't like it. The children that we have been trying to teach to be responsible citizens feel responsible for improving society. The kids we have tried to teach to think for themselves are doing it.

In many cases, in examining this communication gap--which undoubtedly exists between many students and their schools--it is in part our successes rather than our failures that are causing us problems.

We have many students who are energetic, willing, and able enough to challenge the existing structure of public education. They are just what we have said we wanted students to be: curious and eager to learn, ready to explore and to innovate. But some of these bright young people have become alienated. Their ideas colored by moral confusion, by a compound of fear and rage. They have become cynics at an early age. If we are to take some of the credit for their abilities, we must also take part of the blame for their disillusion.

And we should keep in mind the words of the French social historian, Jacques Ellul, who wrote that: "It never occurs to anyone that if the young are calling something into question, if they are beating desperately against our walls, it is they who may be right, and that what they are attacking may really deserve to be attacked."

Do our schools deserve to be attacked? First, let us make a distinction between the violence of troublemakers who seek to disrupt and destroy, to harass and to vandalize, and the students who offer sincere and considered criticism of the schools, or who, at worst, practice civil disobedience for their causes. The lawlessness we cannot tolerate, in school or out. But the others, the critics, are trying to communicate, and even though we may not always approve of their actions, I think that we must listen to them, and try to communicate with them. For in the listening, in communicating, we may discover the causes of their dissatisfaction with the schools and programs we have produced for them.

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What are students saying? What are their criticisms? A lack of relevant, A lack of relevant studies is constantly stressed. These students say that we jam their heads with useless information. They argue that the curriculum is filled with required literature that has nothing to do with today, with the memorization of facts of no

interest or value, and with vocational courses geared to yesterday rather than to tomorrow.

Some students tell me that their teachers talk too much, and that they are discouraged from presenting their own ideas. They want to deal with live issues--many of which are controversial. They say that teachers don't ask them to think, only to give back what the teacher and textbook say. Many students say that homework is drudgery which serves no useful purpose. They object to grades, saying that they can't accurately tell how a student is doing and that grades, rather than learning, have become the goal of their education.

In other words, many of the student critics of our schools are saying some of the same things that many of us in education have been saying for a number of years. We have talked about the problems. They are not content with talk and good intentions. They want changes.

The student critics are demanding more opportunity to participate in the decision-making process in their schools.

Another area of school life which seems to provoke unrest, and indeed court action, is student discipline. Students are asking for due process, for protection of their rights, and the courts are rendering decisions which affect both them and us. Students want a grievance procedure. They don't want dress codes. They want a student council with some powers. They don't want censorship. They complain about a lot of things. Some are old gripes, like the food in the cafeteria or the smoking rules, and some are relatively new, like the charges of racism and discrimination. The list goes on. And like the army, we could say that griping is a good thing, a healthy sign, and let it go at that. Both you and I know that much of what the secondary schools are doing is good. And much of what the elementary schools are doing is good. Our schools are staffed, for the most part, by sensitive and dedicated teachers and administrators. Our programs have been undergoing change and we are trying to keep up with a world that is moving rapidly in many directions.

Students, especially in the lower grades, are being involved in the educational process. We ARE doing more than just talk about individualized instruction. We HAVE BEEN cutting into the dropout rate and ARE TRYING to meet the needs of the slow reader. We HAVE recognized the cries for relevancy with courses from Black history to computer technology. So we could pat ourselves on the back, examine our test scores and count our merit scholars, and modestly admit that we are doing the best we can with the resources available.

We can ignore the militants, the activists, the student critics. We can look on their efforts as unwarranted and ill-informed threats to the schools and the programs we have constructed and learned to administer. In doing so, we will undoubtedly widen the communication gap. Or we can look on these young people and their protests as challenges from our consumers which present us with opportunities for further development and improvement of what we consider to be a basically sound system. I prefer the second view.

Now,as to the question of a communications gap, be it uptight or otherwise. Part of the problem is that we often confuse transmission with communication. We have learned to use press releases, memos, newsletters, and bulletins, and call

them communication. But we seldom have any idea as to whether or not our messages are received. Communication is a two-way street. Both parties must be able to send and to receive. We do the things we do in the name of communication because we have always done them and they are what we know how to do. But what channels exist for feedback? Are we being heard? Can we hear?

Let me give you some examples of communication in this newly rediscovered era of the gap.

Less than a month ago, shortly before the end of the first semester, some boys broke into a high school one night. They left the coke machines and the pay phones along. They didn't steal tape recorders or typewriters, and they didn't vandalize the building. They just took all of the report cards, file drawers and all--more than 2200 of them. The report cards were found, the boys were caught, and the principal interviewed. It would have been no serious problem, he said to reporters. It might have made us a day or two late, but that's about all. And in the last line of one of the news stories the principal was quoted as saying, "If there is one thing inevitable in education, it is report cards." I'm sure he was communicating and the students got the message. But I also think that the students were attempting to communicate, and I'm not sure if the message was fully received.

Another example. Last year a group of students at another high school received permission from their principal to take over their school for a week of what they called an Experiment in Free Form Education. The principal looked at their plans and give them plenty of rope. The students organized literally hundreds of courses, lectures, classes, and seminars. They found work experience programs for almost five hundred of their fellow students. They hand scheduled more than 2,000 students. They put in six months of work, evenings, and weekends, to produce a week of school as they thought it should be. They stopped the bells from ringing, kept the cafeteria open most of the day, didn't bother to take strict attendance, and never mentioned grades. And it worked. Most of the kids came to school, worked hard, and enjoyed the experience. Members of the faculty, many of wh om had opposed the idea, admitted that the kids had made their point. The students had communicated and so had the school's administration whose status and rapport with the students improved greatly. This year in that school there are new courses and programs, and a better attitude toward grading reform. And they still don't ring the bells at the end of every class, as insignificant as that may seem to us--the students claim that it helps improve the atmosphere of the school.

Also last year, a small but highly vocal group of student activists, most of them with long hair and highly individual styles of dress, produced a position paper which in very strong language and no uncertain terms labeled our school system as a place of fear and failure. Their paper received wide circulation and much publicity. The leaders of the group appeared before the Board of Education and brought hundreds of their supporters with them. The meeting was orderly, but it was the politics of confrontation. And it was communication. We heard them and they heard us. We were accused by some members of the public and of our own staff of giving too much attention to a bunch of long-haired troublemakers. There was polarization, but there was also communication. People began to listen to, as well as talk at kids, and they didn't always like what they heard.

For the past two years student council leaders have been meeting with the superintendent and school board regularly. They have proposed numerous recommendations for change, and many of them have been implemented. A major policy on student rights has been adopted and students now serve on some 20 school system-wide study groups and major committees. They are communicating.

Representative Ogden Reid of New York has said it well:--"Our goal should be to educate our youth and then listen to them." Student activism can be a constructive force for the improvement of education. Students and their parents should be involved in a meaningful way in all educational matters, in all decisions which affect them. By both word and deed we must communicate our belief that good citizenship can be best taught and learned by extending the range of student responsibility and by making students accountable for their actions. There should be no fear, not even the fear of failure, in allowing students to make decisions without adult dictation. It is just good pedagogy to respond to the demands and suggestions of students and to make the changes which, in our professional opinion, will help students to learn better, to like and enjoy school more, and to make their learning more meaningful and more valuable to both them and to society.

To stimulate discussion here today let me suggest a few examples of ways in which we might work to close the communication gap, to make the students' school experience better. You will want to suggest others.

Bear in mind that I am not talking about emergency measures. If crime in the streets is washing over into your schools, it is a problem you must deal with immediately. If racial tensions are exploding in your halls, you need solutions right now. But in the long run we must solve these problems with better education, better human relations, and an atmosphere that is responsive to human problems. How can these goals be achieved? Here are a few things we can do to improve the educational climate, to better human relations within our schools.

First, the principal's role is critical. On that I think we all agree. Many principals see themselves as the man in the middle, trapped between militant teachers on one side and radical students on the other. And the principal is the key to a good educational climate in every school. We must help them in their efforts to do their difficult and important jobs. And principals need to change. They must be able, indeed eager, to get out of their offices and into the halls, the cafeteria, the classrooms, to meet with all kinds of students in many types of situations.

Principals need to develop a better understanding of today's student, and learn new skills to deal with him and his problems. We must provide in-service training experiences for principals which include carefully planned role playing and confrontation techniques. Problem centered work sessions which bring principals face to face with the issues in a non-threatening environment are valuable.

Principals must be informed about the changes taking place in society, about the realities of power in the community, and about what students, parents, and taxpayers are saying about the schools.

Principals need prompt and accurate information about recent court decisions. We should help them stay out of court and in the school by keeping them informed.

In summary, we need to help them grow to keep up with the increasing demands made on them.

Second, some teachers need assistance in changing. They meet with these students every day and many student complaints result from their actions or inactions. We must work together to help improve student-teacher relations--to make it possible for teacher and students to see each other as persons deserving of respect--some time to meet together in less formal situations.

We should encourage teachers to take a leaf from the methods book of their elementary compatriots and to involve more students more often in planning their work--to have more student projects, long-term studies, more options for students.

We need to provide training opportunities for teachers in discussion techniques. Our in-service training programs should emphasize the skills that teachers need to cope with students who want to express their opinions, to debate issues, to challenge established ways of doing things. Some teachers do talk too much. We need to be candid and fair in counseling with them.

Teachers and students surely should have similar goals in mind when they come to school in the morning. Sometimes they seem to veiw each other as antagonists rather than as partners in the process of learning. And that gap is one we must learn to close, too.

Third, we must work to improve the situation in counseling services. Perhaps more counseling should be done out of the offices. Too often in our high schools the counselors have insufficient time to meet with students who have problems. They are too busy with the college or vocational work, which is of course important, to talk with kids in trouble. More counseling needs to be done by classroom teachers who know the pupils best. Almost every time I meet with a group of students I hear the complaints--there is nobody in my school I can talk with about my problem--I can't get to see my counselor.

We not only need more counselors, we need more help for the good people we now employ. And we should help them redefine their roles, in some cases, and see to it that narrow educational considerations and the demands of college admission offices don't interfere with their primary function of making it possible for every child to do his best in school.

Fourth, we ought to do something about student councils and other forms of student organizations. If the criticism made by many students that the government organizations are Mickey Mouse affairs with no real power or are not truly representative of the student body, then we should do something about it. We can give the student councils final authority over some areas of school life and operation. We can make them responsible for setting up their own qualifications for office, and urge them to make their organization responsible to the will of the student body.

If the principal exercises veto power over the actions of the student government, he should have to give the reasons for his veto, preferably in writing.

Student organizations ought to be encouraged to be interested in human relations in the school, how the school is organized, the curriculum, homework regulations, as well as in such areas as assembly programs and social functions. Certainly students should be involved in developing and enforcing school rules and regulations.

We have been preaching democracy in our schools for a long time, I think that we should prove that we believe in it.

I would encourage the formation of joint student-faculty study groups to deal with questions of mutual interest. These would include grading, discipline procedures, the handling of controversial issues in the classroom, smoking regulations, drug problems. Student and teacher involvement in making decisions about areas of common concern can only be of benefit to both.

Fifth, we must change the curriculum by pressing for a better balance between teaching about the past and study of current social, political, economic, environmental, human problems. Schools need more autonomy at the school level and less control at the district level.

The public school system is difficult to change. We tend to teach as we were taught and to believe that yesterday's schools are a perfect fit for today's children. Yesterday's schools were good, but that isn't good enough for either today or tomorrow.

One of the editors of Fortune magazine, Charles Silberman, has noted that: "It is never easy for any group to abandon ideas and practices of long standing, and educators are perhaps more hidebound than most where their own work is concerned. But this nation will be unable to hold its own in the hard and exciting years ahead unless the great changes now beginning in public education come to fruition."

This is an exciting as well as a trying time, and we have been changing. But for too long we have ignored the greatest source of new ideas, the hardest working change agent, available to us--our students, and especially those students who are interested in producing a better climate for education, who are clamoring at our gates, and whom many of us view with alarm.

Maybe this generation is different. Maybe the communication gap and the generation gap cannot be closed. But I don't believe that. I believe more students today are concerned about important human values. I believe they want a better world. I believe many of them are sincere, want to try to make changes for the better and have the courage to try.

Both adults and students are demanding better schools. We have taxpayers in revolt as well as students making protests. And we have a choice. We can involve the kids and try together to find answers to the difficult questions they are posing, or we can refuse to admit that they may sometimes be right in their criticism and ignore them. We can start listening to what they are saying, and reading what they are writing; or we can refuse to receive and continue only to transmit, and call that communication.

I cannot believe that the job is impossible. Any group of adults who can spend time and energy trying to talk with dolphins or make sense out of the noise from the stars can certainly learn to talk with their young. That is, if we want to. I think we must.

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